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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate undergraduate teaching assistant (UTA) competence and character and its relationship to learning in the basic communication classroom. Also of interest were the specific UTA communicator behaviors that increase or decrease student perceptions of competence and character. Students responded to a survey which asked them to rate (1) either their UTA's or a university faculty's credibility; (2) their own learning, and (3) describe behaviors that contributed positively and negatively to their teacher's credibility. On the whole, results from this study indicate students perceive UTAs as credible, and UTA credibility is strongly related to student learning. Qualitative analysis revealed UTA communication behaviors that contribute to and detracted from their credibility. Interestingly, UTA scores for credibility were slightly higher than university faculty scores for credibility. Implications for UTAs and UTA training and recruitment are discussed. Contains 21 references. Two tables of data are appended. (Author/RS)

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Running Head: UTA Credibility

Undergraduate Teaching Assistants: The Relationship between Credibility and Learning in the Basic Communication Course

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate undergraduate teaching assistant (UTA) competence and character and its relationship to learning in the basic communication classroom. Also of interest were the specific UTA communicator behaviors that increase or decrease student perceptions of competence and character. Students responded to a survey which asked them to rate a) either their UTA's or a university faculty's credibility, b) their own learning, and c) describe behaviors that contributed positively and negatively to their teacher's credibility. On the whole, results from this study indicate students perceive UTAs as credible, and UTA credibility is strongly related to student learning. Qualitative analysis revealed UTA communication behaviors that contribute to and detracted from their credibility. Interestingly, UTA scores for credibility were slightly higher than university faculty scores for credibility. Implications for UTAs and UTA training and recruitment are discussed.

Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) suggest that across all disciplines colleges and universities utilize graduate and undergraduate students to critique undergraduate student assignments. Economic pressures have forced administrators and faculty to consider instructional strategies that use fewer faculty resources, yet still provide undergraduate students with an acceptable learning experience. Moreover, the use of graduate and undergraduate students as teachers is less expensive than lecture-based instruction because more students can be taught with fewer full-time faculty, thus allowing full-time faculty to teach more middle- and upper-divisions courses (Seiler, 1983). Extant literature (Roach, 1997) has found potential limitations that may exist with the use of graduate teaching assistants, however little research has examined the impact undergraduate teaching assistants might have on their fellow undergraduate students' learning. One potential factor that might influence undergraduate student learning is student perceptions of undergraduate teaching assistants' credibility in the classroom—that is perceptions of their competence and character (McCroskey & Young, 1981).

In a general sense, credibility is defined as the "believability" of the communicator. The construct credibility, or ethos, has received considerable research attention ultimately yielding two dimensions: character and credibility. Both classical rhetoricians and modern scholars believe credibility is an important communication element, and recently scholars have investigated its dimensions. Several investigations conducted in the late 1960s to middle 1970s tried to determine the factors of credibility, but in a review of literature measuring credibility McCroskey and Young (1981) report the "number of dimensions reported varied widely, and the labels applied to those dimensions varied even more widely" (p. 26). Looking for conceptual isomorphism, McCroskey and Young tested the credibility construct revealing the two dimensions of character and competence. Although other dimensions of credibility have been

"discovered," the dimensions of competence and character are a return to the original conceptualizations of credibility detailed by Aristotle (Cooper, 1932). In this study, credibility is defined as perception of competence and character.

Undergraduate teaching assistants (UTAs) have become an important part of the educational process in higher education. The use of UTAs and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in undergraduate courses has increased. Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) indicate that the field of communication studies relies heavily on the use of GTAs and UTAs in the basic communication course. UTAs are a valuable instructional resource because they "personalize" the basic communication course by decreasing the "teacher"-student ratio thereby increasing "teacher"-student interaction (Scott and Young, 1976). Undergraduate students report that working with UTAs is helpful (Gray, Buerkel-Rothfuss & Yerby, 1986), and a good idea (McSparrin, 1990). UTAs are used in a variety of ways in the basic communication course. They provide students with feedback on quizzes, review tests, the final exam, and speeches. They may also prepare and deliver "micro-units" of instruction, assists students when they encounter difficulty attaining a concept and provide students with an opportunity to expand upon or defend answers orally. The purpose of this study was to investigate UTA competence and character and its relationship to learning in the basic communication classroom. Also of interest were the specific communicator behaviors that increase or decrease student perceptions of competence and character.

Despite the apparent benefits UTAs offer the basic communication course, UTAs might not be perceived by their students as having competence and character because they are often young and lack the experience and training of full-time faculty at the institution. Although UTAs often have less experience and less training than GTAs and the faculty at the institution, it

is possible UTAs may be perceived as credible teachers. Typically, UTAs are students who have successfully completed the course and are trained to evaluate student assignments. Sometimes, UTAs are provided with a training manual and are required to enroll in a course designed to train them for their teaching duties (Robin & Heselton, 1977; Johnson, 1977). Since it is not known if students perceive their UTAs as having competence and character, the following research question was advanced.

RQ1: Do students perceive their UTAs as having competence and character?

Research on the relationship between competence and character and learning (Beatty & Zahn, 1990; Wheeless 1974a, 1974b) has found that increases in perceived teacher competence and character have a positive impact on learning outcomes. This relationship suggests that if UTAs are not perceived as credible teachers, student learning could be negatively impacted. Extant literature has examined the relationship between competence and character and learning at the faculty level, however no studies have examined this relationship with undergraduate instructors. Since there exists a positive relationship between competence and character and learning at the faculty level, it is reasonable to suggest the same positive relationship will exit with undergraduate instructors. Thus, the following hypothesis was advanced.

H: Students' perceptions of UTAs' competence and character are positively and significantly associated with student reports of learning.

Also of interest were the specific communicator behaviors that increase or decrease student perceptions of UTA competence and character. The identification of classroom behaviors used to construct or deconstruct perceptions of competence and character could, perhaps, be useful to UTA training concerned with increasing competence and character in the classroom. While there is evidence that increasing a teacher's competence and character has a

positive impact on learning outcomes for students (Beatty & Zahn, 1990; Wheeless 1974a, 1974b) there is little research that provides teachers with advice or strategies to increase their competence and character. Rubin and Feezel (1986) found teacher competence and character were best predicted by the communicator style variables of impression leaving an relaxed. Also, Beatty and Behnke (1980) found that consistent nonverbal and verbal messages led to student perceptions of greater character, but the same relationship was not found for the competence dimension of credibility. Instead, positive vocal cues appeared to be more predictive of competence. In order to identify UTA classroom behaviors that positively and negatively impact student perceptions of their competence and character, the following research questions were advanced.

RQ2: What UTA communication behaviors contribute negatively to their student's perceptions of their competence and character?

RQ3: What UTA communication behaviors contribute positively to their student's perceptions of their competence and character?

Method

Participants

Before participating, respondents were assured that their data would remain confidential. Participants in the study were 281 undergraduate students (125 men, 153 women, 3 unidentified) recruited from an introductory level communication courses at a medium-sized Midwestern university. The average age for the sample was 19.7. In order to answer RQ1 and the hypothesis advanced in this study, one group of participants rated UTAs and a different group of participants rated faculty at the university. 198 participants rated the competence and character of 33 UTAs and self-reported their learning in an introductory hybrid communication course.

The hybrid communication course emphases 1) public speaking, 2) interpersonal communication, 3) small group, and 4) interviewing and uses a personalized system of instruction. The UTAs buy a training manual and attend weekly training sessions. At the time data was collected UTAs had provided students with feedback on quizzes, review tests, and a speech. They also provided students with an opportunity to expand upon or defend test and quiz answers orally and may have assisted students who encountered difficulty attaining a concept. Another group of 83 participants rated the competence and character of faculty and self-reported on their learning in the class. In order to obtain maximum variability in subject matter fields and a broad sample of faculty, students were asked to complete the questionnaire in reference to "the class which you attended immediately before this class." In this way, data relating to 32 different classes/faculty was obtained from the participants. Depending upon whether participants had delivered a speech in the faculty member's class, participants were asked to fill out the questionnaire in reference to "your actual presentation or a hypothetical presentation you might give in the future." At the time data was collected, 51% (42) of the participants delivered a speech for the faculty member and 42% (34) received feedback on the speech. All data collection was completed during the seventh week of the semester to ensure that students were well acquainted with the faculties' and UTAs' classroom behaviors. Respondents received no extra credit or payment for participation.

Measurement

In order to asses UTA/faculty credibility, two dimensions of credibility were measured using McCroskey and Young's (1981) Teacher Credibility Scale consisting of 12, 7-step bipolar adjectives. Several investigations have tried to determine the factors of credibility, but in a review of literature measuring credibility McCroskey and Young report the "number of

dimensions reported varied widely, and the labels applied to those dimensions varied even more widely" (p. 26). Looking for conceptual isomorphism, McCroskey and Young tested the credibility construct revealing the two dimensions of character and competence. Although other dimensions of credibility were.revealed through previous investigations, the dimensions of competence and character are a return to the original conceptualizations of credibility detailed by Aristotle (Cooper, 1932). The 7 step, two-dimensional semantic differential scale measures competence (intelligent/unintelligent, untrained/trained, expert/inexpert, uninformed/informed, competent/incompetent, stupid/bright) and character (virtuous/sinful, dishonest/honest, unselfish/selfish, sympathetic/unsympathetic, high character/low character, untrustworthy/trustworthy). Cronbach's alpha for competence and character combined was reported as .87 for this instrument.

In order to assess the impact of teacher credibility on learning, two items measuring behavioral commitment were taken from Anderson's (1979) Affective Learning Measure. Respondents are asked, "In 'real life' public speaking situations, your likelihood of actually attempting to engage in behaviors recommended by your UTA (or faculty) on speech evaluation forms" and "In 'real life' situations, your likelihood of actually attempting to engage in communication behaviors recommended by your UTA (or faculty)." Each item is followed by four, 7-step bipolar adjectives: likely/unlikely, impossible/possible, probable/improbable, and would not/would. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) found that behavioral intentions are "immediate determinants" of the same future overt behaviors. Admittedly, the relationship is not perfect, but they argue when appropriate methodology is used, behavioral commitment is highly predictive. Anderson reports a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .94 for this instrument.

Finally, in order to assess the specific communication behaviors that positively and negatively impact UTA competence and character, participants were asked to first describe their overall evaluation of their UTA, then asked four questions assessing perceptions of communication behaviors contributing to and detracting form credibility: 1) Thinking about your UTA, describe communication behaviors that contribute positively to your perception of his or her competence, 2) Thinking about your UTA, describe communication behaviors that contribute negatively to your perception of his or her competence, 3) Thinking about your UTA, describe communication behaviors that contribute positively to your perception of his or her character, 4) Thinking about your UTA, describe communication behaviors that contribute negatively to your perception of his or her character. The four questions about character and competence are intended to correspond with the two dimensions of McCroskey and Young's (1981) Teacher Credibility Scale.

Statistical Tests

In order to answer RQ1, the first six items of the Teacher Credibility Scale were summed to create an index for perceived competence of faculty and UTAs, and the remaining six items of the Teacher Credibility Scale were summed to create an index for perceived character of faculty and UTAs. The means of the summed items were analyzed using a t-test to determine if of the difference in the means between faculty and UTAs were statistical significance. Alpha levels were set at $p \leq .05$ for the t-test analyses. In order analyze the hypothesis advanced in this study, correlations were computed between the two dimensions of credibility and the two measures of learning.

Qualitative Analysis

In order to identify UTA classroom behaviors that contribute to and detract from competence and character, a process of analysis consistent with the grounded theory approach was begun (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This method allows for the discovery of categories during the analysis. A priori assumptions were not applied to determine if responses fit preconceived categories; instead, a classification system was derived directly from the data. The first round of analysis involved the construction of preliminary category labels based on the topics judged to be thematically salient (Owen, 1984). The second round of analysis represented a refinement of the category system produced in the first round. At this time, it became apparent that there was significant overlap between the reported communication behaviors contributing negatively to competence and the reported communication behaviors contributing negatively to character, thus the negative competence and character behaviors were collapsed into the general category of communication behaviors contributing negatively to credibility. The third round of analysis reaffirmed the category system. A body of quotations and summary ideas inspired by the qualitative responses were assembled and copied onto notecards. The result is a typology of communication behaviors that positively contribute to students perceptions of the competence and character and communication behaviors that negatively contribute to students perceptions of the collapsed category of credibility.

Results

Quantitative

RQ1 was concerned with whether or not UTAs are perceived as having competence and character. These results are presented in Table 1. (See Appendix A.) The means for UTA competence ($X = 35.45$, $SD = 4.92$) and character ($X = 36.211$, $SD = 5.11$) were both higher than

means for faculty competence (X = 34.48, SD = 6.40) and character (X = 31.80, SD = 6.66). The difference in means of competence between UTAs and faculty was not statistically significant, however the difference in means of character between UTAs and faculty was statistically significance ($t = 5.95$, $p < .0001$).

----------Insert Table 1. Here----------

The hypothesis advanced in this study predicted a positive relationship between UTA competence and character and the student self-report of learning. The hypothesis was supported. There was a significant and positive relationship between competence and public speaking behaviors ($r = .360$, $p < .0001$) and communication behaviors ($r = .469$, $p < .0001$) as well as a significant and positive relationship between character and public speaking behaviors ($r = .418$, $p < .0001$) and communication behaviors ($r = .524$, $p < .0001$).

Qualitative

The qualitative responses were subjected to an analysis consistent with a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The results are presented in Table 2. (See Appendix B).

----------Insert Table 2. Here----------

The typology of communication behaviors was subdivided into "Behaviors Contributing to Competence," (On time, Clear explanations, Knows course content, Knows classroom procedures, Qualified) and "Behaviors Contributing to Character," (Positive personality, Fair grading, Approachable, Caring, Egalitarian, Nonverbal). There was significant overlap between behaviors that contribute negatively to UTA competence and character, thus these two

dimensions of credibility were collapsed into the general category of "Behaviors Detracting From Credibility" (Tardy, Absent, Negative personality, Unqualified, Uncaring, Unfair grading, Leaves early, Cultural differences, Unfamiliar with classroom procedures, Unfamiliar with course content, Showed favoritism, Physical appearance, Nonverbal).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine UTA competence and character and its relationship to learning in the basic communication classroom. This study also sought to identify communication behaviors that contribute to and detract from UTA competence and character. On the whole, results from this study indicate students perceive UTAs as credible, and UTA credibility is strongly related to student learning.

The first research question sought to determine if UTAs are perceived as credible by their students. In order to answer this question, the mean scores of UTAs and faculty on the Teacher Credibility Scale were compared. UTA mean scores on competence and character were both slightly higher than faculty mean scores, however the differences for competence were not found to be statistically significant. One possible explanation for lower faculty scores on competence and character is that some of the 32 faculty/classes evaluated by students were taught by GTAs and not full-time faculty. The exact number of GTAs evaluated was not possible to determine since students sometimes do not know if their instructor is a GTA or full-time member of the faculty.

The hypothesis advanced in this study set out to determine the relationship between UTA competence and character. This hypothesis was supported. This result was consistent with previous investigations of the relationship between credibility and learning. The strength of the

correlations between learning and credibility emphasize the importance of establishing credibility and avoiding communication behaviors that detract from it.

The second and third research questions were posed to identify communication behaviors related to competence and character. The qualitative analysis identified communication behaviors contributing to and detracting from UTA competence and character. The results indicate UTAs construct their competence and character through a variety of classroom behaviors. These results suggest UTA knowledge of the course in general is related to competence, and UTA fairness and personality is related to character. Communication behaviors detracting from UTA credibility reflect a lack of basic knowledge about the course. Participants reported a lack of familiarity with the course policies and course content detracted from UTA credibility. This lack of knowledge about the course resulted in unclear explanations and an inability to answer questions about quizzes and tests. UTA character, however, was related to a positive personality, caring, and approachability. When UTAs listen to their students, work hard, are willing to help, and are easy to talk to they are contributing to their perceived character.

Implications for the UTAs

These results demonstrate UTAs have a variety of behaviors which are likely to influence their perceived credibility. UTAs should examine the typology in light of their own classroom behaviors. Some of the categories represent behaviors UTAs do almost unknowingly, however many of the behaviors, both contributing to and detracting from credibility, can be consciously extinguished or enacted. Results of this study should remind UTAs of the "nonspecifics" of their duties. Not only are UTAs responsible for course content and procedures, but they should also consider whether or not they exhibit a positive personality, a willingness to help, and inviting nonverbal communication.

Implication for UTA Training and recruitment

Results from this study underscore the importance of UTA training and recruitment. UTA training should be well organized and should take place throughout the semester to ensure UTAs are familiar with relevant course policies. Gorham and Christophel (1992) found that teacher behaviors are one factor contributing to overall motivation and that negative teacher behaviors are more central to student demotivation than positive behaviors are to student motivation. Their investigation found that teacher behaviors that confuse students and cause dissatisfaction with grading were the most demotivating teacher behaviors. The objective of training should be to familiarize UTAs with course information and the importance of a positive and caring attitude. Training should also focus on objective, consistent, and clear grading practices. UTAs should grade hypothetical quizzes, tests, and speeches, and should be trained to be able to justify their grading decisions. Additionally, students who are recruited to become UTAs should have successfully completed the course they will be teaching, and exhibit a genuine desire to help other students.

Limitations

This study is limited by the relatively small number of UTAs and faculty evaluated by the students. Additionally, a portion of the 32 faculty/classes evaluated by students may have been taught by GTAs and not full-time faculty. The exact number of GTAs evaluated was not possible to determine since students sometimes do not know if their instructor is a GTA or full-time member of the faculty. Caution should also be exercised when interpreting the results of this research. Data obtained for this research is correlational and does not permit causal interpretation. Moreover, the measure of learning used may have been limited by the students' ability to judge their intentions of enacting recommended communication behaviors in the future.

Future Research

Future research could attempt to determine the validity and reliability of the typology of communication behaviors. Moreover, not all communication behaviors are of equal importance in the construction of credibility. Future research should also attempt to determine which communication behaviors are most important in creating and destroying competence and character. Finally, future research could seek to replicate this particular study using a more sophisticated measure of learning that includes affective and cognitive dimensions.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Mean and t-Tests Between UTAs and Faculty

	Means (SD)		t-value
	UTA (n=83)	Faculty (n=198)	
Competence	35.45 (4.92)	34.48 (6.40)	1.37
Character	36.21 (5.11)	31.80 (6.66)	5.92***

***$p \leq .0001$

Appendix B

Table 2. UTA Communication Behaviors Related to Competence and Character

Behaviors Contributing to Competence
ON TIME Ready when students arrive
CLEAR EXPLANATIONS Sought answers to questions, asked if explanation was understood, complete explanations, parsimonious explanations
FAMILIARWITH COURSE CONTENT Explains difficult concepts, familiar with course topics, familiar with text
FAMILIAR WITH CLASSROOM PROCEDURES Familiar with course schedule, organized, followed course policies, reminds students of upcoming deadlines and due dates
QUALIFIED Personal experience with course, well trained, good advice
Behaviors Contributing to Character
POSITIVE PERSONALITY Honest, open, confident, outgoing, happy, positive attitude, nice, polite, cheerful, warm, lively, respectful, trustworthy
FAIR GRADING Objective, clear explanations of assignment criteria, consistent grading
APPROACHABLE Easy to talk to, uses students name, says "hi" in and out of class, willing to help
CARING Works hard, asks how day is going, understanding, encouraging, listens to concerns
EGALITARIAN Treats everyone equally
NONVERBAL Smiles, clear articulation, soft voice, body relaxed, keeps eye contact

(Table Continued Below)

Behaviors Detracting From Credibility

TARDY
Is late to class

ABSENT
Does not show up for class, no excuse for being late, no prior notice of absence

NEGATIVE PERSONALITY
Timid, mean, talks down, grumpy, standoffish, shy, sad, too enthusiastic

UNQUALIFITED
Needs more training, not right for the position, lack of experience

UNCARING
Unsympathetic, puts down grading system, unsympathetic, does not listen

UNFAIR GRADING
Grades harshly, unclear instructions, lack of feedback on speeches, changed course policies, unable to explain grade

LEAVES EARLY
Does not stay to answer questions

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES
Accent difficult to understand

UNFAMILIAR WITH CLASSROOM PROCEDURES
Unorganized, unsure of what was going on, no reminders of upcoming assignments, asks other UTAs for help, refers to training manual too much

UNFAMILIAR WITH COURSE CONTENT
Unsure of certain topics, unclear explanations, could not answer questions about quizzes

SHOWED FAVORITISM
Focused on men more then women

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE
Dresses like a student not a teacher

NONVERBAL
Body too relaxed, does not smile, fidgety, says "um"

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